

Big gifts push Irene fund closer to goal

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By Peter Hirschfeld Vermont Press Bureau

MONTPELIER — A recent surge in donations has replenished the charitable fund created to help victims of Tropical Storm Irene recover from flood damage.

The Vermont Disaster Relief Fund has taken in more than \$3 million over the last three months — nearly as much as was raised during the first year of the fund's existence.

Officials credit a strategic shift toward targeted fundraising solicitations after the one-year anniversary of the storm, which hit Aug. 28, 2011. Chris Graff, vice president of communications for National Life and a member of the fund's board, said the tactic has yielded some larger-dollar donations, notably a \$1 million gift from Burlington real estate magnate Tony Pomerleau.

"We've put together a much more strategic campaign in that we're doing more one-on-one soliciting, whether it's businesses or people of means, and showing them the unmet need that's out there," Graff said Monday.

The fund has taken in \$6.6 million to date and is two-thirds of the way toward the \$10 million that officials say is needed to bridge the gap between what government will provide in assistance and what victims actually need to get back on their feet.

Graff said the "fund of last resort" has paid out \$2.4 million in grants to 223 people.

"For a lot of these folks, we're making it so they can get back into homes by making repairs or rebuilds they need to move back in," he said. "It's everything from basement foundations to flooring to sheetrock, bathrooms, furnaces, hot water heaters, mold remediation."

The board opted to cap grants at \$20,000, which Graff said will allow the fund to extend aid to the additional 600 families he expects to seek help in coming years.

Gov. Peter Shumlin celebrated the milestone at a reception Monday evening for high-dollar contributors as well as prospective donors. Shumlin said he's been among those pleading with would-be donors to open up their checkbooks.

"There aren't very many Vermonters that can give a million dollars," Shumlin said. "But there are those who could write a check of \$1,000 or \$2,000. And those are the people we need to be reaching out to now."

With Superstorm Sandy taking center stage in New York and New England, Shumlin said it's important to remind Vermonters that many of their own neighbors continue to struggle in the aftermath of Irene.

“Our job now is to show the face of the Vermonters who are still struggling, and you’re going to see us doing that in coming weeks as we enter this holiday season,” Shumlin said.

A recent \$800,000 gift from the Wisconsin-based Argosy Foundation helped boost the fundraising effort.

Graff said he’s hoping that sales of “Vermont Strong” license plates will also edge the fund closer to its goal. The special-issue license plates have already generated more than \$500,000 for the cause.

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